HOUSEKEEPING AMONG MALAY PEASANTS

by

ROSEMARY FIRTH

Second Edition

UNIVERSITY OF LONDON
THE ATHLONE PRESS
NEW YORK: HUMANITIES PRESS INC.
1966
The homely routine of housekeeping has only recently been thought fit for scientific study; yet really it is vital to the understanding of any economic system. Although conditioned by the productive possibilities and traditions of the society, consumption has an important influence on the future trends of production. For any sociological study of an economy, a knowledge of the way in which wealth is used is at least as important as a knowledge of the extent of that wealth. In fact since wealth is a concept of value, and therefore subjective, it is only from the standpoint of consumption that wealth can be measured at all. The way in which goods are distributed, stored and utilized, greatly affects the ultimate consumable value of such goods. In almost all societies, the household, whatever its composition, is an important unit in the distribution and utilization of wealth. In many societies it is the one unit through which almost the whole of the economy can be studied as a connected and functioning whole. Such a study, using the household as the unit of consumption, is nothing more than a study of the housekeeping problems of the society as they affect the whole economy.

A popular illusion about peoples not using money is that they have no housekeeping problems, because they either naturally eat the healthiest diet, buy in the cheapest market, and conserve their resources in the most farsighted fashion, or are so improvident and extravagant as to leave no room for rules of economic management. But the housekeeper's problems are fundamentally the same the world over, and from the scientist's point of view their solution is governed by the same general principles. The basic problem is universal: not only to have enough to eat to keep alive, but also to satisfy the demands of personal tastes, religious rules and a multitude of social obligations, all as important to the life of the group as mere subsistence is to the life of the

1 Minor verbal corrections only have been made to the original Introduction.

HAMP B
organism. It is in abnormal conditions, in a beleaguered city, a ship wrecked at sea, a country at war or in revolution, that a man may begin to place a higher value on his own continued physical existence than on his social existence as a member of a group. Under such conditions only will the primary aim be to preserve life alone. In all normal conditions, the aim is to maintain one’s life along with one’s position in the family, the village or other social grouping. To do this, bare physical needs will sometimes be drastically curtailed, and hunger or other physical discomfort suffered for the sake of family obligations or social prestige. Hence no \textit{a priori} solution of the problem of management of resources can be postulated as valid in advance of a knowledge of the institutional pattern of the particular type of society.

The degree of knowledge, skill and energy, combined with the relative valuation by the individual of personal and social needs, will determine the extent to which the problem of managing resources is efficiently solved. In different conditions, the different ‘pulls’ of demand will take a different strength and direction. But the reasons which underlie this can be analysed. Different conceptions of housekeeping are not haphazard, accidental, due entirely either to ignorance or avarice. They are the result of different social evaluations of money, time, leisure, hospitality, display, tradition, initiative, and a host of other considerations. The resulting pattern of behaviour, in conjunction with the level of resources determined on the productive side, results in the standard of living of a people.

There are local standards which may be more or less closely reached, but there is no absolute criterion of a universally good standard. In the West, the gradual raising of wage levels, combined with beneficent social legislation, has resulted in a real rise in the standards of living of millions of people in the industrialized countries. Unfortunately this has tended to make many people think that a similar improvement in the standards of living of people all over the world is to be brought about by adopting similar methods. Reformers have tended to conceive the improvement of standards of living too much in monetary terms and the command over a more varied range of goods. But if these goods are not intelligently used, if increased money income breaks up traditional mechanisms for social services and the pool-
ing of resources, such an increase in the financial level of income may have the reverse effect.

But it is not only in communities where money plays only a small or subsidiary part in the consumable income that a false picture of the standards of living can be given by a study concerned merely with the ostensible income level. Nor is it only external conditions, geographically determined, which can alter effective use of income. A Malay Government clerk and his Chinese counterpart, earning the same salary and working in the same area, have very different patterns of household economy. The Chinese love to eat sharks’ fins, which the Malay will never touch, although he will eat the flesh of that fish which no religious sanction forbids. On the other hand, the Malays’ avoidance of pork, beloved of the Chinese, is dictated by religious rule. A moment’s thought will show that these small differences in the tradition of housekeeping can be found nearer home. The English never eat haggis, and more rarely oatmeal than the Scots. In New Zealand middle-class houses where one rarely finds servants, a man will help his wife with the washing-up, which is still unusual in many similar English families. This division of labour in the home, as well as the choice of foodstuffs, vitally affects the real consumable income of the household.

It is particularly imperative to have an empirical picture of the pattern of household consumption where it is desired to alter or raise the standard of living. But the difficulty of getting a people to change their food habits is amply demonstrated by the labours of the wartime Ministry of Food. Yet the chief preoccupation of many administrators of developing societies has too often been an increase in the financial standards only. Where it has been seen that an alteration in the distribution and use of wealth, particularly food, is required, a real prior knowledge of the actual housekeeping problems, needs and ‘prejudices’ of the people is unusual. Yet in order scientifically to raise a people’s standard, it is imperative to understand all the constituents of that standard before any effective steps can be taken to change it.

Two examples will show how such ignorance may affect administration. A British official concerned with wartime rice conservation in Kelantan, Malaya, was astonished to learn that the fishermen, with their access to this additional source of food, did not on that account eat less rice per head than the inland
peasants. Rice is regarded as the staple food, and fish is mainly the relish to it. No Malay fisherman would consider that he had had a 'square' meal of fish alone, and he would be astounded if he were told that his ration of rice was to be cut down for this reason.

We asked an intelligent Malay District Officer what he considered the fisherman's weekly food expenses might amount to. He gave us an estimate which roughly coincided with the figures I had established empirically, but he arrived at this figure by calculations of what proportions might be spent on rice, fish, vegetables and so on, which did not in fact represent the allocations actually made by the fishermen. Thus he allowed a large sum for vegetables which was mostly spent on snacks by the peasants. This estimate would evidently give the administrator a false idea of the actual standard in terms of dietary qualities which the peasant was enjoying on a given income level.

It is idle to make suppositions as to what the peasant probably can do with a given income. The only scientific method is to find out empirically how income really is spent. This monograph is an attempt at such a study. Before proceeding with the analysis a brief description of the conditions under which the work was carried out will be given.

My husband, thanks to the generosity of the Leverhulme trustees, was enabled to carry out an investigation into the social and economic conditions of a small fishing village in Kelantan, on the north-east coast of Malaya, and I collaborated in the work. While he was investigating the production and distribution of wealth, I attempted to find out how this wealth was used. Besides making visits to the markets and shops, as well as to weddings and other social events where unusual expenditure was taking place, I daily visited houses every evening for consecutive periods ranging from one month to twenty-one weeks, and took notes on every cent expended each day, the food eaten and received and stored in the house, and in many instances the manner of cooking it.

We spent eleven months in Malaya, from August 1939 to July 1940, of which eight months was spent in one area, and the rest in a brief comparative survey further down the coast to the south, and also on the west coast. Kelantan was at that time one of the Unfederated States of Malaya, governed by the Sultan,
with the advice of a British Adviser, resident in the capital, Kota Bharu. The Malays studied are all practising Mohammedans, and must not be confused with the pagan aborigines of the interior. Kelantan is the most predominantly Malay of all the states. In 1939 the estimated Malay population was 344 odd thousands, as against a little under 30 thousand Chinese and 11 thousand Indians. The European population was at that time only a hundred. The Chinese are mostly engaged in trade, and contact between them and the Malays is mostly of a business nature. No intermarriage occurs, owing to religious differences, although there is a certain amount of intermarriage between the Malays and Mohammedan Indians. There are some Siamese settlements in Kelantan, which, again owing to religious differences, are self-contained. The administration of the state was partly by European and partly by Malay officials. The District Officer where we lived was a Malay.

Although we arrived in the country knowing very little of the language, we found this was almost an advantage to us, as it enabled us to pick up straight away the very strong local dialect spoken in Kelantan and Trengganu, which presents some difficulty to Europeans who have lived many years in the country and are fluent in the standard form of Malay. Although we never attained to that theoretical and literary mastery of the language which Government servants and many others have out there, a certain facility in the picking up of language by direct contact with those who use it enabled us to converse in a stumbling fashion with the fishermen after about a month, and with ease after about three. We heard and understood, and I am afraid we spoke, the broadest peasant dialect, shocking to the ears of the literary purist. But we were told by the local people, as indeed we could see for ourselves, that they could understand and talk to us easily where they could not do so with other ‘Tuans’, coming from the west with the pure standard form of Malay. It is of the utmost value in sociological work, not only to make oneself intelligible to the people with whom one is working, but also to make them feel at ease, in a way which use of the same twists of speech and accent materially increases. Where local terms have been given in this book, therefore, no apology is offered for rendering them in the dialect used in this area.

We had a house built for us in Malay style on the edge of the
beach, between two main fishing villages, close to other Malay houses. It soon became known that we were not Government officials, though it must not be supposed that we did not meet with considerable distrust to begin with in our persistent enquiries. The Malay, however, is on the whole a friendly and talkative person, and he is proud. When we explained that we wished to write a book telling our own people how Malays lived and worked, they were quick to understand this, and being themselves curious about other peoples and lands, soon found it perfectly natural that English people should want to know all they could be told about the excellence of Malay customs and institutions. We used a simple knowledge of elementary first aid, and an extensive supply of medicines and antiseptics, to engage the initial confidence of the villagers. For myself this confidence was gained to begin with primarily through the children, from whom it spread to the adults. They soon learnt to call me ‘Mem’, which was usually abbreviated to ‘Me’, a Malay name which I am sure most of them soon imagined was my own personal name. Raymond Firth was simply ‘Tuan’.

In doing such a piece of work, the advantages of team work possible between husband and wife working together were invaluable. It would have been physically impossible for my husband both to have been out on the beach all day recording fish catches, and to have made the round of so many houses for daily budgets. In addition there was the visiting of markets and the census work which we did together. It was possible for me to check up on expenditure and savings by the independent information Raymond Firth gave me as to the weekly income of these households. I well remember one occasion when I was given some figures on saving by a certain family, which my husband proved could not have been correct, as they exceeded the total amount earned during that period. Another visit when I gave my reasons for doubting this information, produced further valuable explanations which finally accounted for the discrepancy. There were many occasions when we were able to check up in this way. Of course every anthropologist has his own ways of verifying doubtful information, but two people working together on different but correlated problems have a great advantage. I would almost say that any economic survey ought to be done ideally by a husband and wife working together, but
unfortunately this is a convenience of research for which even the most conscientious anthropologist is not always able to equip himself.

In co-operative work of this kind it is not always possible accurately to delimit the field of each one's research. Some of the sections of the following monograph, notably the analysis of population figures, which we collected together, and the bulk of the section on 'Divorce and Polygyny', are the work of Raymond Firth. But since this is only one side of the survey which we did, the whole work should really be read in conjunction with the wider study of the whole of the fishing economy which he undertook. As unfortunately the war has other claims on his work which have delayed publication, this must appear as a small earnest of the full body of results which the generosity of the Leverhulme Trustees enabled us to obtain.¹

This is a sad occasion on which to publish a work on the ordinary daily routine of a people so much of whose normal life must now be upset by war and invasion. It is given not only in the hope of being of general theoretical interest, but in the firm conviction that one day this quiet and comfortable pattern of life will be restored to the Malay.

¹ Raymond Firth's work was published in 1946 as Malay Fishermen: Their Peasant Economy, London.
I

Conditions of Housekeeping

The Malays with whom we are concerned in this study live in villages strung out along the coast between the sea and the rice fields inland. They make their living primarily from fishing and subsidiary occupations, and few of them cultivate rice. Some of the richer fishermen own coconut orchards, which bring them in a little extra money from copra sales, but on the whole the sale of fresh and dried fish is the primary source of income. There are no owners of rubber orchards drawing a regular cash income as there are on the west coast. Rice is the staple, and most of it must be bought with the cash earned from the sale of fish to the inland markets. The housekeeping problems of the Malay fisherman's wife therefore present themselves to her mainly as financial ones.

Most of the fishermen belong to a boat group and to a net group, and the fish catches are usually sold en bloc to a fishdealer on credit, the proceeds being divided at the end of the week, according to an elaborate system by which each factor, crew member, boat-owner, skilled diver and so on gets a definite proportion. The income of any fisherman, therefore, varies greatly according as to whether he owns boats or nets, and has any money capital, as well as to his own skill and the ordinary luck of the season, though the latter plays a much smaller part than might at first be supposed by a superficial glance at the catches. It is only during the two months at the height of the monsoon season, when it is too rough to go out to sea, that individual fishing with a hand net is practised, and this fish alone is sold individually by each man. So that, although from the productive side the fisherman is a co-operative worker on a profit-sharing basis, from the point of view of his wife, who has to do the housekeeping, he might also be regarded as a wage-earner, drawing a variable weekly salary. Any estimation of this must be very rough owing to the variable conditions just mentioned,